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ABSTRACT

Students who are taught to understand and apply Korzybski's uses of semantics to their writing will learn to write more concretely. As students locate words and descriptions vertically on Korzybski's scale of abstraction levels, they will become able to perceive how meanings change when descriptions become either more general or specific, to differentiate between an idea and an example of an idea, and to discern patterns of abstraction levels in paragraphs and entire books. To make their writing more specifically useful, students should be encouraged to qualify isolated words with quantitative or identifying numbers and dates and to replace "is" with an active verb. By incorporating these writing aids, students will be reminded to constantly observe, question, and experiment with meanings and to express their own ideas in modestly specific and accurate sentences. (CK)

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Using Korzybski's Semantics To Teach English Composition

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In the January, 1968, issue of COLLEGE ENGLISH, William H. Youngren claims that semantics is worse than useless, because it is confusing and wrong. He seems not to know its basic principles--propositional functions, operational definitions, the theory of types, Korzybski's non-identity, non-allness, and self-reflexiveness of language--all of which Anatol Rapoport's easily available essay "What is Semantics?" explains.[1] Student writers need not know these principles by these names, but they do need to know enough semantics to know what levels of abstraction are, and to know that while no description is ever totally accurate or the whole truth, the dates and index numbers and avoiding the use of is which Korzybski recommended can help them make their writing unambiguously clear and specific.

Using Korzybski's Ladder of Abstractions

Once students see what levels of abstraction are, they can see that paragraphs work from a general idea to the particular details which explain or prove it, or from details to the more abstract and general conclusion which sums them up. Once they see such patterns, they can begin to write such paragraphs themselves, avoiding both generalizations unsupported by any visible facts, and rambling details unexplained by any general idea. Use Korzybski's ladder to show students what these levels are, and how paragraphs work either down that ladder (from a general idea to more specific details) or up it (from details to a general conclusion).

For example, ask them to make the description "car" specific enough for an advertisement offering that car for sale, or for a report that it has been stolen. They may suggest a more specific word, such as "Chevrolet," but that could mean any one of millions of past, present, or possible future Chevrolets. How can we tell which particular one is meant, or whether it might be worth the price asked? Have your students try adding qualifiers to make the description more specific. In doing so, they will produce a noun-cluster, such as

a 1955 Chevrolet two-door sedan

Structural linguistics and semantics overlap here, in that the

longer and more complicated the structure of the description, the more specific its reference is apt to be.

Continue on down Korzybski's ladder to more complicated and specific descriptions by adding more qualifiers, such as

a 1955 Chevrolet six-cylinder two-door sedan, number 876962

There were once and there may still be thousands of 1955 Chevrolet six-cylinder two-door sedans, but only one of them is number 876962--which is why this description is specific enough for the registration forms in some states. Add the color, the license plate number, the time and place of the robbery, and the description is specific enough for a report of a stolen car. But no description can ever be final or totally accurate; another qualifier can always be added. Try it and see; also let your students try this and discover it for themselves.

Then go up Korzybski's ladder instead of down, getting more and more abstract and general, as in "car" to "transportation" to "culture." As each increasingly abstract label refers to more items, it says less about any one of them individually:

Language

culture
transportation
car
Chevrolet (increasingly abstract and general)
1955 Chevrolet two-door sedan
(increasingly concrete and specific)
1955 Chevrolet six-cylinder two-door sedan
number 876962
the same car on October 4, 1968, coming down the north side of Siskiyou Summit at 72 miles an hour . . . (no description is ever totally complete or accurate)
. . .
(and beyond language is the car itself,
and the atoms of which it is composed)

The world itself, beyond our words

Students should invent such ladders for themselves, working both up and down from such labels as Suzy, civil war, and freedom; there are also useful exercises at the end of chapter ten of Hayakawa's LANGUAGE IN THOUGHT AND ACTION.[2] Such exercises can show students what an example of an idea is, and how misleading the example and the idea can be as descriptions of one another. For example, what might that 1955 Chevrolet suggest about us, as an example of our culture, if and when archeologists pry it out of the rubble of Sunnyvale a thousand years from now? What might they guess about us, and how accurate would such guesses be? How reliably does any single example prove a general claim?

The greater the jump up or down the ladder, the more striking the idea or example may be, and possibly the more puzzling, as the far-fetched metaphors the metaphysical poets used may illustrate.

Still, such far fetches can make sense. For example, while such laws of physics as Newton's 'Every action has an equal and contrary reaction' and Einstein's $E = mc^2$ are extremely abstract and general--literally universal--they have been repeatedly confirmed by the concrete specific examples they explain, such as the kick felt when a gun fires, and the amount of mass converted to energy as radioactive elements decay (the E equals the mc^2 every time). Examples make ideas sensible to us in concrete terms. Students do follow such changes in the level of abstraction in what they read, as in these first two paragraphs of the second chapter of Drew Middleton's THE SKY SUSPENDED:*

(the paragraphs)	(the level of abstraction)
(1) Time has dimmed and controversy obscured most of the great battles of World War II. The literary arguments of generals and admirals, the tumultuous years between, have combined to blur our vision of what was once clear and urgent. The Battle of Britain is an exception. Today, twenty years after it was fought and won, it is fixed forever in the harsh hot sunlight of that terrible and glorious summer of 1940; a great battle, a famous victory won at long odds and by a narrow margin.	a general claim about a huge event, World War II ↓ a claim about a specific part of that war ↓ more specific still: the date, weather, fame, odds, and outcome of that battle

This first paragraph goes from a war in general to a specific battle in that war; the second paragraph goes from a general comment about that battle to specific memories of it, and then back to general comments that are still more specific than the first part of the first paragraph:

(2) There must be many others who feel that twenty years ago is as yesterday. In my mind's eye the pilots still sprawl in the sun at Manston, the German bombers still move aloofly up the Thames, I stand in a Kentish lane and see a tormented Stuka trying to shake off a Hurricane. What we have forgotten is how much hung on the issue.	a general claim about that battle ↓ three specific examples of the author's memories of particular places and aircraft

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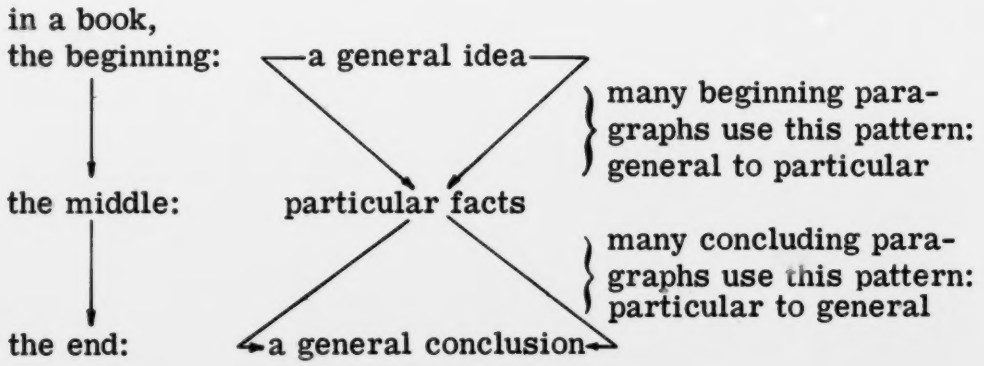
> The future of the world was in the charge of a few hundred high-spirited young men. Like the Battle of Watterloo, it was a very close thing.
>
> (page 15)

and by contrast, general comments as to what we have forgotten

Not just paragraphs but whole books seem to follow either halves or all of this general-to-particular-to-general pattern:



The first paragraph follows the first half of this pattern, and the second paragraph follows the whole pattern.

If this pattern is accurate, we should find the most specific language in the middle of non-fictional books, and in general we do. In the middle of THE SKY SUSPENDED, the language is often so specific that we are told the particular place, date, hour, persons, aircraft, and altitude, as in

> Martlesham 11/8/40 . . . At 1200 hours Pilot Sgts. Allgood and Hampshire were engaged by seven Me 110's at 5000 feet . . .
>
> (page 66)

And if this pattern is accurate, we should also find a general moral or conclusion in the last pages, and we do: "the lesson 1940 teaches" is that

> Despite its fumblings and uncertainties, democracy by its representation of the mind and spirit of all the people can in hours of trial exhibit a resiliency and morale that can be shaken but cannot be broken

--a point the next paragraph makes still more generally:

> Look back to 1940 and take heart. Democracy does the damndest things.[3]
>
> (page 190)

By this point, the book's end, so general a conclusion is meaningul because it sums up nearly 190 pages of particular details which tell us just what "damndest things" that democracy (Great Britain) did that year (1940). Notice how general the language of the conclu-

sion is--lesson, democracy, mind, people, things--compared to the report of the two pilots, Allgood and Hampshire, attacked by seven Me 110's at 5000 feet that noon. To see how particular such facts are, and how general the conclusions drawn from them are, students need to distinguish levels of abstraction--as they must to understand the textbooks they read, and to take intelligent and terse lecture notes. By using Korzybski's ladder, they can learn to do so.

Using Korzybski's Dates and Index Numbers

No matter how complexly specific our descriptions, they are only words, and always partial; beyond the limits of our language is the world itself, which did include those pilots and their aircraft, and still more specifically, the atoms that did compose them, now long since scattered. We can and sometimes do use etc. as Korzybski recommended, as a reminder of the limitations of language--and not just etc., but also such words and phrases as sometimes, so far, apt, could, might, maybe, in general, about, etc. These remind us that the world is complicated and forever changing, and that our knowledge and language are at best only partial and approximate. Such reminders may lead us to a more modestly careful and accurate use of language. We need to be skeptical about what we say, and to be willing to look at facts and to ask questions without supposing that we know the answers already. Such a modesty makes Holden Caulfield not just sympathetic, but trustworthy. In his discovery of phoniness, of what is often just talk, he keeps suggesting that his own words are not the whole truth by repeatedly using such synonyms for etc. as "and all." He also says his vocabulary is "lousy," meaning, apparently, that he feels that his words are often not adequate to the facts. He's right; words are only sounds (phones) in air or marks on paper, which we use as signals, which may be inaccurate or misunderstood. To assume that words have some magical power or reality or automatic accuracy is silly, and irresponsible. If they did, a single word would be perfectly precise in isolation, but two simple experiments will show that this is not so. First, ask your students to write down what they think is the meaning of such philosophers' favorites as freedom, good, truth, or beauty, and to use these words or such forms of them as free, true, and beautiful in sentences; then see how wide and confusing a variety of definitions and sample sentences they produce. Next, get them to see that such words as and, or, but, if, is, yes, no are only meaningful when combined with other words: for instance, ask them to say yes (or no) without first telling them what it is they're saying yes or no to, and then ask them why they are reluctant to say it.

In other words, an isolated word can only be ambiguous.[4] To make words usefully specific, we combine them: "1955 Chevrolet" is far more specific than either "1955" or "Chevrolet" by itself. The more complicated the cluster or sentence, the more it can

mean, and with less ambiguity. But to be really specific, descriptions must include dates or other qualifiers to indicate when, where, how, why, because everything changes in time and with varying circumstances. No 1955 Chevrolet is now the car it was in 1955, and its behaviour at seventy miles an hour is not what it is at thirty--differences which can kill you, and which let students see why being specific does matter. To be specific, use such qualifiers as dates and adverbs, in such patterns as

prepositional phrase, the 1955 Chevrolet verb + object + adverb
(when? where?) (who or what?) (does what? to whom? how?)

Have your students invent and compare such variations of this and similar patterns as

In 1964, my 1955 Chevrolet was still running reliably.
From thirty miles an hour, a 1955 Chevrolet takes thirty-six or more feet to stop even on dry pavement and with well-adjusted brakes.
At a constant sixty miles an hour, the six-cylinder manual-shift 1955 Chevrolet went about nineteen miles per gallon.

Get them to see that such statements may be true in some circumstances, but not in all; for example, a car that usually starts and runs reliably may not start at all at forty below. To indicate what the circumstances are, we need more qualifiers; as a result, in interestingly complex and mature prose, most of the information is apt to be in the qualifiers.

Among these qualifiers are the index numbers Korzybski recommended. Youngren invents an example to show how awkward it would be to use such numbers: "Semanticist$_3$ writes in book$_7$ that philosopher$_{12}$ wrongly answers question$_{38}$." He need not have bothered. His invented example is on page 260 of number four of volume 29 of COLLEGE ENGLISH. We need such index numbers and often dates as well to locate quotations. As a result, most footnotes include one or several index numbers. Footnotes themselves are generally also numbered, as are chapters, and often the parts or reasons in arguments. We also use index numbers in many other ways, such as

addresses, including room, apartment, floor and street numbers, box numbers, postal zones, etc., as in U.S. 40 and 1403 Sixth Avenue;
telephone numbers;
account and policy numbers (look at the cards and licenses in your wallet);
car license, model, and serial numbers (a Volvo 122S is not a Volvo 144S);

geographical locations, such as 49°north, mile 126, peak 12,225 (an otherwise unnamed mountain whose summit has been mapped as 12,225 feet above sea level);

isotopes (uranium 235 is not uranium 238; much of the world's recent history hinges on that fact);

parts numbers, and the numbers of items offered for sale in mail order catalogs.

and flight 408, Boeing 727, English 210, IBM 740, Walden Two, etc. Awkward to use? It would be far more awkward not to use these and other index numbers. Let your students find most of the examples themselves, and see how we use them to make crucial distinctions clear. Take flight 480 instead of 408, and you may find yourself in Pocatello when you wanted to go to Paris.

Index numbers can remind and help us to be specific, and not to judge whole groups by single examples or by stereotyped reactions, as bigots do in such vicious, abstract, and emotional circles as 'a Jew is a Jew' and 'Jews are all alike.' Despite Youngren's claim that "Whatever makes a bigot, it isn't language" (page 274), Hitler and Joseph Goebbels used emotionally loaded abstractions to convert a whole nation to bigotry. One way out of such circles is to be more specific, so that instead of going round in such empty and endless verbal circles as "a puzzle is a riddle is a puzzle is a . . . ," we stop talking long enough to collect and examine examples of puzzles, and the more of them, and the greater their variety, the better. In other words, instead of reacting emotionally to an abstract label, try observation and questions and experiments; as Orwell said in "Politics and the English Language," the conscientious writer keeps his eye on his subject and writes as concretely as he can about it, avoiding emotional abstractions.

To make their writing specific and concrete, have your students avoid abstract name-calling, including classifying of the 'X is a Y' pattern. Have them use active verbs instead. We can write and speak a great deal of clear, forceful, and idiomatic English without using the verb is, despite Youngren's claim that "we must realize that it is impossible to do so and still speak English" (page 263); "we must realize that it is impossible" only to believe his attack on semantics. Mrs. Hattie Converse, who teaches English at Ashland High School, in Ashland, Oregon, tells me that she has her students write without using is for weeks at a time, to force them to avoid weak and wordy passive constructions, and dubious generalizations. Without is, they use vividly concrete verbs, in tersely specific sentences.

Despite Youngren's claims, it doesn't matter whether or not language began with agreements as to what each word means; we may never know how it began. What matters is that we agree enough as to what our words mean now to avoid confusions. That we do agree, more or less, is what makes dictionaries, grammars,

and other descriptions of language possible. Our mostly tacit agreements also make language public, and publicly useful; without them, language would have no meaning and not much use. We may forget that is can be misleading, in part because it leads so easily to such neat but arbitrary abstract classifications, often with moral judgements and emotional loading included. Before classifying anything, look at it, ask questions, and in case of doubt, count or measure. Don't just say "Suzy is a bad girl" (how final that is can be!). Ask 'Bad for what? Who says so? How can we tell?' In other words, instead of indulging in those Aristotelean classifications Youngren seems intent on defending (as if philosophers had learned nothing since William of Occam), take Bacon's and Galileo's advice: find some concrete evidence. Words like good, bad, hot, cold may be only emotional judgements; it was no accident that Galileo called mathematics the language of science and invented a clock and the thermometer, so precise measurements could replace such vague and often emotional classifications as hot, cold, fast, and slow. Once we have facts to report, we can use active verbs, as in

Suzy helps (whom? to do what? how? when? where? why?)
lives (how? where?)
often sees (what? and how many times in how many is often?)
etc.

One way your students can think to ask useful questions, and to remember the basic pattern of English sentences, is to keep asking

WHO? does WHAT? to WHOM? when, where, how, why?

--subject, verb, object, qualifiers, in that order--SVOQ for short. Notice that this pattern asks about actions, not about the static classifications of Aristotelean definitions ('X is a Y'); as a result, this pattern may discourage the use of the 'X is when... ' construction because it encourages the use of active verbs--all of them more specific synonyms of does, instead of is. And because SVOQ lets us ask a far wider range of useful questions, it lets us discover more to say.

In short, it is Youngren's objections to semantics that are worse than useless. With Korzybski's ladder, students can see what levels of abstraction are, and thus can learn to write and understand paragraphs. With the dates and index numbers and avoiding the use of is that Korzybski recommended, they may learn to write more modestly specific and accurate sentences.

Endnotes.

[1]William H. Youngren, "General Semantics and the Science of Meaning," COLLEGE ENGLISH, 29,4 (January, 1968), 253-285; Anatol Rapoport, "What is Semantics?" in THE USE AND MISUSE OF LANGUAGE, edited by S. I. Hayakawa (Greenwich, Connecticut: Premier Book t166, Fawcett, 1962), 11-25.

[2]S. I. Hayakawa, LANGUAGE IN THOUGHT AND ACTION (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1949, 1964); pages 180-185 in the first edition (1949) and 190-198 in the second (1964). In both editions, the tenth chapter includes a useful diagram of Korzybski's ladder.

[3]Drew Middleton, THE SKY SUSPENDED (New York: Pyramid Book R668, 1961), 15, 66, 190; by permission of David McKay Company, Incorporated.

[4]In English, an isolated word is also grammatically ambiguous. In other words, as Solomon Barrett, Jr. pointed out in THE PRINCIPLES OF GRAMMAR (Boston, 1872), we cannot classify a word as a noun or verb or any other part of speech until we see how it patterns with other words in a phrase or sentence. Students can discover this for themselves by using down and round as noun, verb, adjective, adverb, and preposition in sentences, and various forms of love, black, cool, etc. as noun, verb, adjective, and adverb.